



The October War

by Captain William C. Brown

Prelude to the Assault

The October War of 1973 is known by many names. The Arab nations call it the Ramadan War and the Israelis call it the Yom Kippur War. This conflict was fought on Muslim and Jewish Holy days — an advantage to the Muslims and a hindrance to the Israelis.

The October War of 1973 actually began when the Six Day War of 1967 ended. The results of this conflict could be compared to the Arab nation's "Versailles Treaty of 1918," as it had with the post-World War I nation of Germany. The Jordanians lost control of the city of Jerusalem and were dealt a severe blow in the loss of the West Bank of the Jordan River. As a result of the Six Day War, the Egyptians lost the entire Sinai Peninsula and strategic use of the Suez Canal. The Syrians lost two-thirds of its air force by the second day of the conflict, and at the end of the Six Day War, the Golan Heights was in Israeli hands. The Six Day War would not be the end of Arab hostilities toward the Israelis, but a continuation of past hostilities.

During March 1969, former Egyptian President, Gamal Abd al Nasser of Egypt, would publicly renounce the June 1967 Cease-Fire Agreement between Egypt and Israel. This would begin the War of Attrition (1967-1971). President Nasser knew that the Israeli Defense Forces were primarily made up of reservists and could not sustain a long conflict or afford a large loss of manpower and materials. During the War of Attrition, the Egyptians would launch large artillery attacks against the Israeli fortifications along the eastern bank of the Suez Canal, the Bar-Lev Line. These attacks would be followed by commando raids against the same fortifications and deep penetration of Israeli territory at crucial road junctions and communi-

cations nodes. In turn, the Israelis would retaliate with deep air strikes into the interior of Egypt and daring cross-canal raids into the Egyptian western bank of the Suez Canal. In one such Israeli commando raid, the Israelis, with the support of CH-53 "Jolly Green Giant" helicopters, stole an Egyptian P-12 radar system's acquisition and command trailer. The trailers were sling-loaded beneath a CH-53 and flown to Israeli territory across the canal. During the 3-year war, both sides would be affected by day-in and day-out attacks. Finally, in August 1970, another cease-fire agreement would be brokered by the United States with the support of the Soviet Union, to put an end to the War of Attrition.

Overall, the Israelis would come out ahead, as far as internal security, by isolating and destroying terrorist cells in their newly liberated territory from the 1967 Six Day War. The Bar-Lev Line would be reduced from 31 hardened positions to 26, but a second line of hardened defenses was established five to seven miles behind the first. The Egyptians received added Soviet aid in the form of additional air defense equipment manned by Soviet technicians. Additionally, Soviet fighter pilots were taking an even bigger part in aerial duels with the Israeli air force over the Sinai Peninsula. The Egyptians were also able to replenish the losses of arms and munitions from the 1967 Six Day War and the War of Attrition through the support of the Soviet Union.

On 28 September 1970, President Nasser died from natural causes and his predecessor would take the reign of Egypt and the Arab League. Anwar Sadat succeeded Nasser as president of Egypt and assumed responsibilities of leading the Arab nations once more to war with Israel in October 1973.



The Deception

Prior to the assault launched on 6 October 1973, the Egyptians and their allies had to deny Israeli intelligence information on the coming attack. A series of deception programs were emplaced in the Arab media, especially the newspapers. Egyptian newspapers reported that prior to the attack, the Romanian Defense Minister would be visiting Cairo on 8 October. One of Egypt's top-ranking admirals would be participating in sailboat races on the Nile River the same day. On 7 October, a Royal Air Force Comet commercial airliner was to test airfields near Cairo and Luxor in anticipation of Her Royal Highness, Princess Margaret's arrival in Egypt. To mask the Egyptian and Syrian forces massing near Israeli borders, two Syrian terrorists hijacked a train with Jewish refugees in Austria.

When the Israelis noted the Egyptian and Syrian forces moving toward the respected parts of the Israeli borders, the Israelis dismissed it as a precaution toward possible Israeli retaliation for the hijacking. Egyptian public radio was quoted as saying it was part of a mobilization drill and that engineer forces would refurbish the Egyptian portion of the Suez Canal. Egyptian commanders made certain their soldiers were seen along the bank swimming or fishing, especially on the Egyptian portion of the Suez Canal bank. Also, 4 days prior to the attack, the Egyptian commander responsible for Syrian and Egyptians forces, General Ahmad Ismail Ali, war minister and commander in chief, flew to Damascus, Syria, to discuss the attack timeline. Egyptian and Syrian commanders both wanted the sun behind them and in front of the enemy, but timing would be impossible. A compromise was reached and the H-hour was changed from 1800 hours to 1405 hours on 6 October. The Israelis would

soon learn the actual time when Egyptian and Syrian jets screamed over the Suez Canal and Golan Heights, dropping bombs and attacking positions.

The Attack

At 1405 hours on 6 October 1973, a combined and coordinated aerial assault by the air forces of Egypt and Syria struck at crucial points of the Israeli defenses. The Egyptians attacked the future bridgehead points on the Suez Canal, to include overwatching defensive positions of the Bar-Lev fortifications. The Egyptians also carried out air strikes on communications nodes and electronic warfare sites behind the Israeli defenses positioned deep in the Sinai. The Syrian air force was conducting strikes all along the Golan Heights, to include Mount Hermon, which had an important observation post at the 7,000-foot mark, which was equipped with sensitive electronic sensor devices to monitor against possible Syrian attacks toward the Golan Plateau.

Simultaneously, Egyptian and Syrian ground forces stormed toward the Israeli borders. Eight thousand Egyptian commandos and raft-borne infantry assaulted across the canal while the Syrians crashed over the purple line of demarcation with United Nation observers watching as the Syrian juggernaut pushed toward Golan Heights and the heartland of Judea.

Thirty minutes after the initial assault across the Suez Canal, the Egyptian flag was flying on the Israeli eastern bank. Within an hour, Egyptian engineers using pontoon rafts, industrial water pumps, and hoses would tear huge gaps into the massive sand ramparts in mere hours, unlike the Israeli estimation of more than 12 hours to breach the high sand walls on their side



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of the canal. The Egyptians used the same technique of removing large quantities of sand during their construction of the Aswan Dam on the Nile in the mid-60s. The Egyptians kept the assault across the canal moving toward establishing crucial bridgeheads.

At H+2, Egyptian engineers were constructing pontoons, Bailey-type bridges, and ferries across the Suez to push mechanized forces over to the eastern bank to support the already established commandos and regular infantry. By 7 October 1973, the Egyptians would span the canal with 10 heavy bridges. Two bridges would be built for each of the five attacking Egyptian divisions. By 8 October, the Egyptians would have well over 400 tanks on the eastern portion of the Suez Canal, preparing for the attack forward to the crucial passes of the Sinai. The Israelis would not allow the bridgeheads to exist. Israeli General Albert Mandler's division immediately counterattacked against the Egyptian penetration of the canal only to be met by a steel storm of antitank guided missiles and Egyptian infantry antiarmor ambushes firing rocket propelled grenades (RPGs). Israeli Major General Avraham Adan's armor division suffered heavy losses answering calls for help, and was repulsed by the Egyptian's use of antiarmor weapons, especially those known as the "suitcase SAGGER." The calls for help from the now isolated Bar-Lev Line not only added to the decimation of the Israeli forward divisions, but also of the Israeli air force. The Egyptians established an air defense barrier consisting of the surface-to-air missile-2 (SA-2) for higher altitudes and longer ranges over the Suez Canal. They also incorporated the SA-3, an intermediate missile system to protect the bridgeheads from the Israeli air force, which had been dubbed the "flying artillery" in the Six Day War. With the combined air defense barrier and the 1-kilometer buffer zone forward of the Bar-Lev Line established by RPG- and SAGGER-wielding Egyptian infantry, the Israeli air and ground forces were slowly bleeding themselves white in the Sinai. Unknown to the Israelis, they were inadvertently fulfilling one of President Sadat's key tasks for this attack — decimate the Israeli Defense Force to its breaking point. The Israeli counterattacks may have been costly but proved

fruitful because they stalled the Egyptian momentum, and with that, the cadence of battle was about to turn in favor of Israeli forces. However, Israel had to face the threat from the Syrians and the Arab forces under their command.

The Syrian Front

Syrian's armored forces moved on the Golan Plateau to be met by Israeli armor and mechanized infantry brigades. These brigades were made up of reservists that were activated at the beginning of the war and were first to be sent forward. Israeli's chief of staff, General David Elazar, and its defense minister, Moshe Dayan, both agreed that Syrian forces posed a great threat to Israel because of their close proximity. All manpower and materiel were diverted to the Syrian front to halt the Syrian drive, and all other forces were sent to the west to delay the Egyptian advance into the Sinai. The Syrian forces were able to drive deep into Israeli territory and make their way toward the Jordan River bridges, which would have allowed them free access into the heartland of Israel had it not been for the heroic actions of two Israeli brigades — the 7th Armor Brigade and the 188th Armor Brigade.

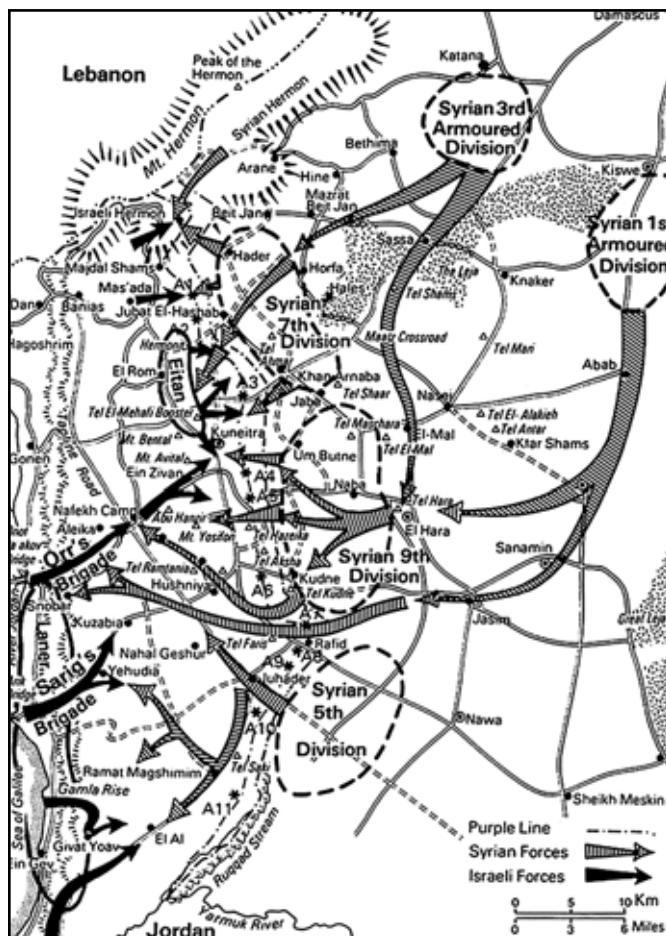
The 188th would be virtually destroyed while repelling attacks toward the two crucial bridges over the Jordan River in the southern part of the plateau. Essentially, two Israeli armored brigades fought and delayed three Syrian elements in division strength. The Israelis were fighting between 3 to 1 and 6 to 1 against Syria in tank-on-tank battles. The tenacious defense of the 188th Armor Brigade — totaling 57 tanks in strength — along the TransArabian Pipeline (Tapline) Road, allowed additional Israeli forces to move up to the front. Major General Dan Laner, commander of the front, literally stood on the Arik Bridge directing arriving units into battle.

By midnight on 7 October, Syrian forces closed within 5 kilometers of the northern bridge of Bnot Ya'akov just west of Tapline Road, a maintenance road for a major oil pipe running north to south through the region. The Israelis were able to hold the Syrian drive for 3 days until they could counterattack

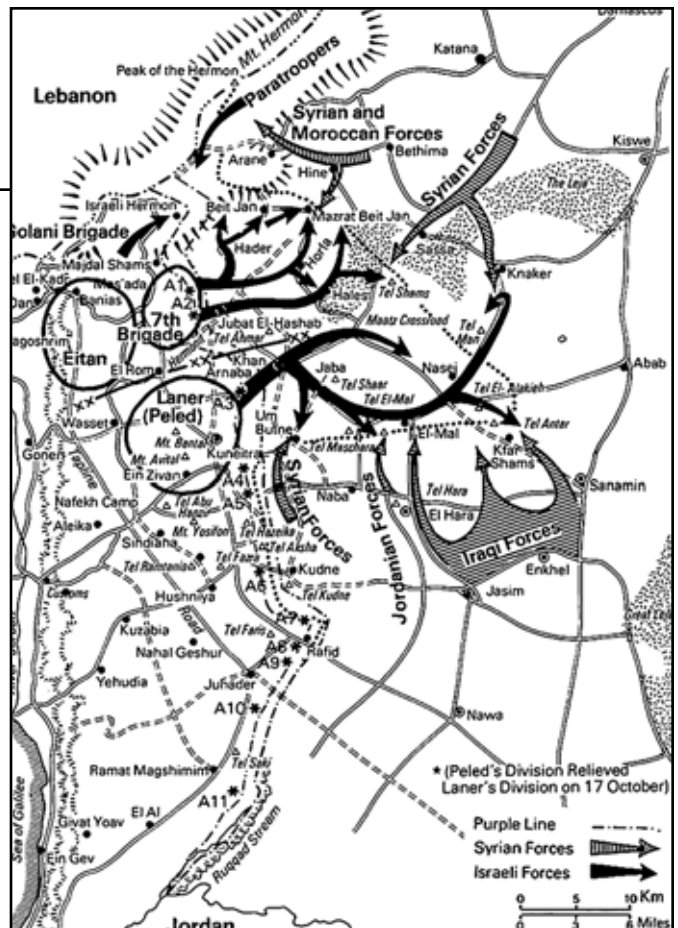
with five mechanized brigades and one elite light infantry brigade (Golani Brigade). By 10 October, the Israelis had pushed the Syrian forces back to the original demarcation line, known as the purple line, and continued the attack through the purple line and into the interior of Syria.

Syrian President Assad asked Egyptian President Sadat to cease-fire, but President Sadat only promised support, but no cease-fire. The Soviets stepped in to conduct some saber rattling with the United Nations, the United States, and Israel. This also stepped up resupply of much needed war materials to Syrian airfields that had not yet been destroyed by the Israeli air force.

On 11 October, the Israelis attacked across the purple line and pushed into the Syrian interior battling Jordanian, Iraqi, Saudi, and Moroccan forces under the control of Syrian field commanders. The Israelis keeping the tempo of the attack in their favor, pushed within 30 kilometers of Damascus. The Israelis held onto this area well until the final cease-fire that ended the conflict. By the time the Israeli counterattack against the Syrians occurred, the tactical situation was set to turn the tide in favor of the Israelis, who faced Egyptian forces poised to make their drive through the Sinai.



Maximum Syrian penetration, midnight Sunday, 7 October 1973



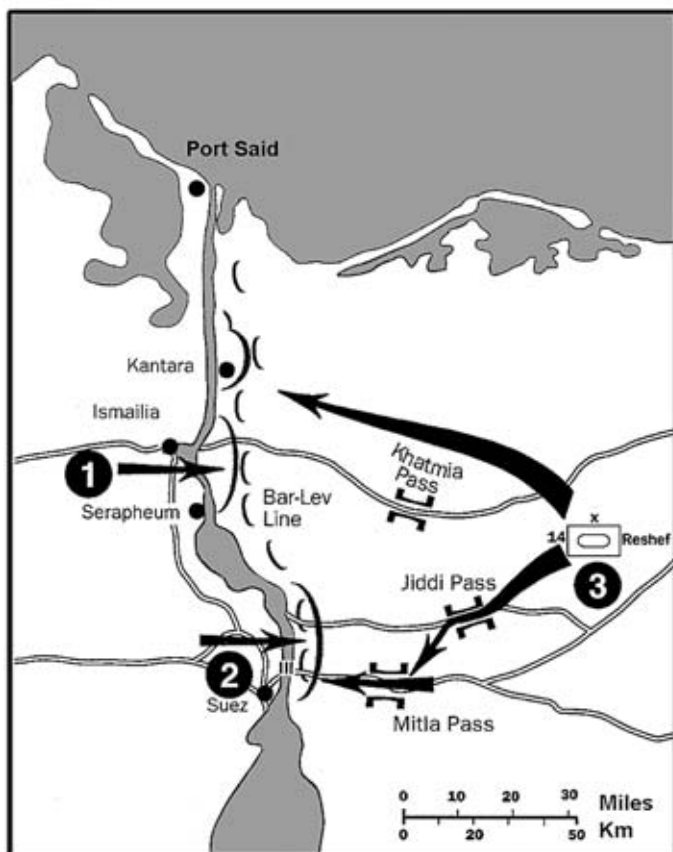
The Israeli breakthrough, 11 October 1973

The Turning Point in the West

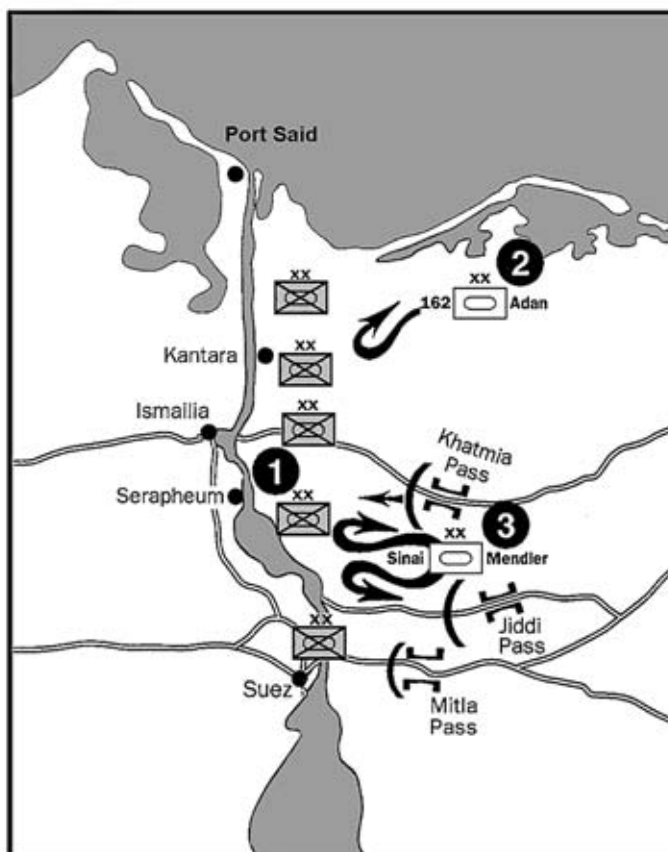
Due to aggressive Israeli counterattacks against the Egyptian forces on the eastern portion of the Suez Canal, the Egyptians continued to mass their armored forces so they could make an adequate drive toward the coastal road near the town of Romani. The Egyptian 2d Corps was tasked to take the coastal road and Tasa Road, and seize the town of Bir Gifgafa, while the Egyptian 3d Corps in the south would drive on toward the two southern passes. The Tasa Road moves through the central part of the Sinai toward the key town of Bir Gifgafa, and finally the two southern passes of Giddi and Mitla. This attack would take place on 15 October. Three Israeli divisions waited for the attack — and for the Egyptians to begin open desert warfare.

Once Egyptian forces had left their protective air defense umbrella over the Suez Canal, the Israeli flying artillery started to wreck havoc among the Egyptian armored formations and supply columns moving eastward. The Israeli tank forces also waited to exploit the Sinai's open expanses to take advantage of their gunners' long-range accuracy and of unhampered maneuver through the open terrain. The Sinai was tank country forward of the passes and Bir Gifgafa.

The Egyptian 2d Corps took the brunt of Israeli punishment, but reached the outskirts of Bir Gifgafa. In essence, the Egyptians controlled the western end of the Khatmia Pass. The Egyptian 3d Corps seized the southern pass of Mitla, but was unable to secure the Giddi pass from Israeli Major General Ariel Sharon. This caused a salient in the Egyptian line, and would be an advantage for Israel during their countercrossing.



The Egyptian campaign began with crossings at Ismailia (1) and Suez (2). After breaching the Bar-Lev Line, the Egyptians dug in to await the Israeli counterattack. The defensive movements by the Israeli 14th Armored Brigade (3) were uncoordinated and diffuse, resulting in heavy losses from Egyptian antitank missile fire.



Rather than exploit the initial Israeli losses and confusion, the Egyptians expanded their positions east of the canal (1), moving five heavy divisions across. The Israelis attacked again, with the 162d Armored Division (2) in the north and the Sinai division (3) to the south. Though again taking heavy losses, they stabilized the front and slowed the now ponderous Egyptian offensive.

The Israeli Countercrossing

For nearly a week, the tempo of the attack had been in Egyptian hands, but the course would soon change. With the Egyptian 3d Army's two-pronged attack pushing as far east as the Mitla Pass and being stopped on the western end of the Giddi Pass, they had overextended the line from their flanking unit in the north, the 2d Egyptian Army. The Israelis planned to take the pressure off of their forces facing the Egyptians in front of the passes, and turn the tide from reaction on the Israelis' part to that of the Egyptians. So, Operation Gazelle was initiated.

The Israeli staff had a plan for crossing the canal that had existed since early 1970, and the plan was modified to suit the Israeli counterattack plans. Operation Stouthearted Men, the revision of Operation Gazelle, would begin on 15 October 1973. The operation would involve three Israeli armored divisions crossing the Suez Canal at the town of Deversior on the most northern point of Great Bitter Lake, which would cause the encirclement of the Egyptian 3d Army on the eastern side of the Suez Canal. The Israelis expected the Egyptians to cease their forward attacks and try to throw the Israelis back over the canal, or destroy them on the western bank of the Suez, resulting in attacking Egyptian forces going from proactive to reactive maneuvers. Their tempo of attack would cease through the Sinai as they tried to cut off the Israelis and relieve the Egyptian 3d Army.

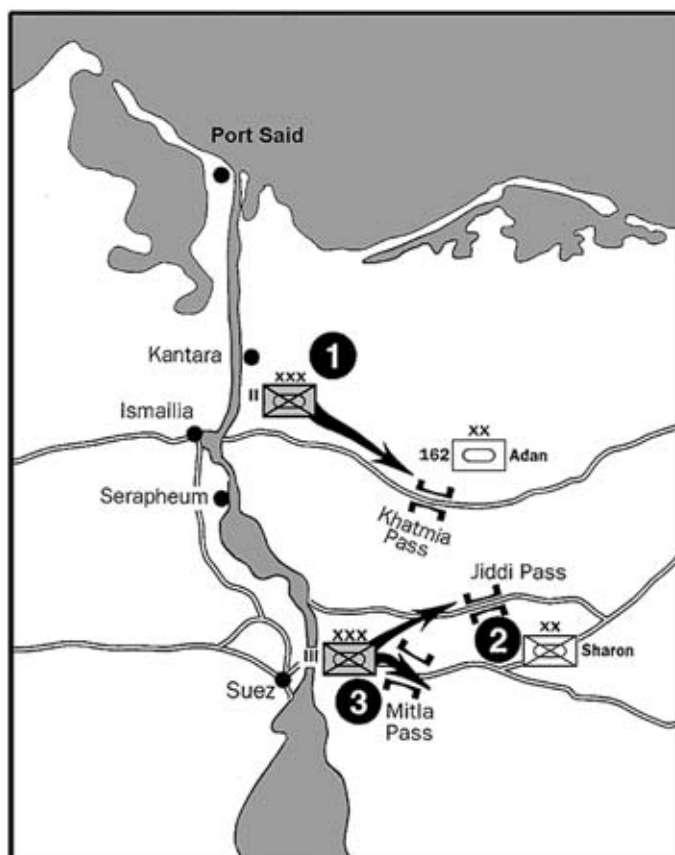
The Israelis, with support of their flying artillery, were able to drag a pieced-together bridge, made from a pontoon bridge and commercial bridging equipment, and establish their own bridge-

head on the western bank of the Suez Canal. Sharon's division would attack, build, and establish the bridgehead, while the Adan division moving from the northern part of the Sinai and Major General Kalman Magen's division from the southern Sinai exploited the bridgehead on the western bank of the Suez. The two armored divisions would pass through Sharon's division and would penetrate up to 20 kilometers on the western shore of the Suez, cutting off all major supply routes to the Egyptian 3d Army, which numbered some 20,000 men and well over 500 armored vehicles. The Israelis from that point would fend off many relief operations conducted by the Egyptians to free their trapped men. The Israelis would continue their fragile hold on the western bank until the U.N. cease-fire, which the United States brokered with the support of the Soviet Union. Both nations would come very close to facing one another in the Sinai. This was also one of President Sadat's key goals, bringing the world to light on the Arab-Israeli conflict — not as a regional conflict but one of global proportions.

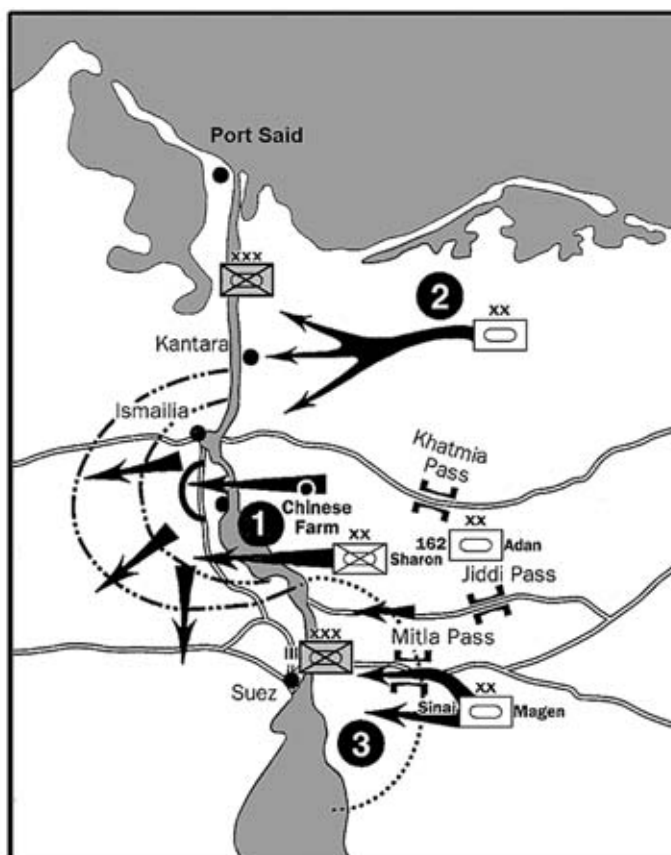
Lessons Learned

The October War of 1973 would change how modern armies would fight future battles with new technologies and tactics associated with technology. It also demonstrated that a lucky and clever enemy could outfight a technologically advanced force as the Egyptians had done with the Israelis.

The Egyptians used extensive air defense systems to balance out their inferior air force when confronting the Israeli air force. Egyptian aircraft, for the most part, was delegated to a ground-attack role and would not fly far beyond their air defense bar-



After a buildup of several days, the Egyptians entered the third phase of their campaign, the breakout. In the north, II Corps (1) made for the Khatmia Pass, while in the south, III Corps attacked toward the Jiddi (2) and Mitla (3) passes. The slow pace of the Egyptian attacks, plus the Israeli's combined arms tactics, made their eventual defeat inevitable.



Using plans he created while in the Sinai, Ariel Sharon led the Israeli counterattack across the Suez Canal. Striking at the weak point between the two corps (1), Sharon broke into the Egyptian rear, completely unhinging their position. Sharon was supported by fixing attacks in the north (2) and south (3).

rier established along the Suez Canal. Fratricide was an issue when pilots did not enter through designated points in the barrier. The Egyptian's approach to the high sand rampart demonstrated simple ingenuity on their part. What the Israelis estimated would take Egyptian forces 10-to-12 hours to demolish, only took 2-to-3 hours in some places along the canal.

Water cannons drastically upset the Israeli timetables for defense. The Egyptians also incorporated a 1-kilometer buffer zone forward of the canal where they had been infiltrated by infantry and commandos wielding RPG and SAGGER antitank guided missile (ATGM) systems. As the Israeli armor crashed through the desert, with little or no infantry support of their own, to rescue forces trapped in the Bar-Lev Line, they were met with devastating volleys of SAGGER missiles or antiarmor ambushes where a tank would be struck as many as five times by RPGs.

The Egyptians had learned from the Six Day War and the War of Attrition that the Israelis were loyal to trapped or besieged comrades and were also tenacious in the attack. Leader of the Egyptian army, General Ahmed Ismail used that to his advantage to initially devastate Israeli forces as they counterattacked in piece-meal fashion.

The Egyptians and Syrians were solely dependent on the Soviet Union for technical support, arms, munitions, and transportation on a global scale. The latter was the Soviet Union instituting the "air-bridge," where a massive amount of Soviet war materiel was airlifted into Cairo and Damascus. The technicians manned air defense equipment around Cairo to the Ismailia

highway. The air defense technicians numbered some 500 personnel. However, the support did not stop there. Since the War of Attrition, Soviet fighter pilots were flying combat missions in the Sinai against the Israeli air force. Their exact losses for the October War vary from 23 wounded to six killed.

The United States also alleged that North Korean pilots were also flying combat missions over Egypt, but the North Korean government denied the accusations saying that they were deployed only for a training exercise. Another important asset the Soviet Union provided its Arab allies was strategic intelligence.

During the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, the Soviet Union would launch a total of two COSMOS spy satellites to gather information on both Arab, but more importantly, Israeli losses throughout the war. This would enable the Egyptians to gage their progress against the Israeli forces and help determine strategic targets to attack with SCUDs. The true lesson to be learned from the war would be felt by Israeli forces.

Prior to the conflict, Israeli forces were overconfident and underestimated their Arab enemies, as well as its capabilities, as the Israeli air force discovered as it broke against the Egyptian air defense barrier over the Suez Canal. The Israeli's use of ATGM was limited to defensive. They were also the first generation of ATGM of massive sizes, such as French SS-10 and SS-11, the European equivalent of the Soviet SNAPPER missile. Initially, the semiautomatic tracking tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided (TOW) missile was offered prior to the war, but the Israelis declined. This would change, as the Israelis were in dire straits early on in the conflict. The Israeli



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government made a request for the TOW missiles and the United States airlifted the missiles from Holland. They had literally been removed from the European war stock.

Israeli armored forces learned a terrible lesson from rushing forward without infantry support. Time and time again, Israeli tanks were picked off by a SAGGER gunner who had fired less than 150 missiles in training prior to the war. RPG-equipped infantrymen gnawed away at the Israeli armor as it closed against the 1-kilometer buffer zone established on the first day of the war to protect the bridgeheads and allow Egyptian armor forward to the eastern bank of the Suez. The Israelis learned the importance of electronic countermeasures against air defense systems.

The Israeli air force took a devastating beating as it attacked the Egyptian bridgeheads across the Suez. In one day, the Israelis lost a total of 20 aircraft against the air defense barrier. As the war continued, Israeli commercial airliners were seen landing at U.S. Air Force bases on the east coast picking up electronic countermeasure pods and other components that were successful against North Vietnamese air defense systems.

The most valuable lesson learned by the Israelis was that they had underestimated the abilities of their Arab adversaries. They would not be fighting the Arab armies of 1956 or 1967, but a new Arab soldier who was determined to take back what was his and restore his prominence in the Middle East. The Israelis were relying more and more on sophisticated weaponry to press their advantage on their Arab enemies; and not relying on simple and proven past techniques. A large part of Bar-Lev fortifications had lapsed into disrepair — especially Israel's secret weapon. Pipes leading from the edge of the bank were connected to oil tanks on Israel's side of the Suez. The pipes would be opened, oil would float to the surface, and then be ignited.

Egyptian frogmen cemented the nozzles shut, but reported that many of the valves had been overtightened so it would take more than the turn of a hand to operate. The original fort had 31 fortified positions, and after the War of Attrition, five would be sealed with sand, bringing the total number down to 26. The Israelis had given up maneuver for an initial static defense.

The United States watched as the war progressed and as events unfolded in the Sinai and Golan Heights. The October War reinforced the idea of the combined arms fight and the role that advanced technology plays in a conflict, which can be carried into present day.



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